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U.S. considering giving Soviet experts a look at SALT monitors

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Washington—The Carter administration is quietly considering bringing a team of Soviet experts to the United States to examine the sensitive monitoring devices this country would use to police a treaty totally banning nuclear tests.

The idea would be to demonstrate seismic and computer equipment in order to remove Russian suspicions that the devices, implanted on Soviet territory, would have any purpose other than treaty monitoring.

Government sources, who acknowledged the possibility of the Soviet visit, were extremely wary about discussing it and apprehensive about public reaction at this time.

The implication plainly was that the administration is deeply involved in one controversy about the ability to monitor compliance with a treaty—the new strategic arms limitation treaty with Russia—and does not want debate further complicated with a different set of “verification” arguments.

Timing and official announcement of any Soviet visit to seismic sites here is therefore a crucial matter as far as the administration is concerned.

The SALT pact limits the numbers of nuclear missile launchers and bombers in each superpower's arsenal. The treaty provides that each side can monitor the other's compliance, using its own means without interference by the other. But there is no on-site inspection provision.

The so-called comprehensive test ban (CTB) treaty, however, would—or so it is now expected—permit on-site inspections and unmanned monitoring stations on each party's territory.

The test ban treaty has been under discussion ever since the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain negotiated the limited nuclear test ban treaty of 1963. The 1963 treaty bans nuclear testing in space, in the atmosphere and under water, But not underground. There now are 105 parties to the pact. France and China have refused to sign it, and continue testing.

A comprehensive ban, under negotiation by the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain now in Geneva, would put an end to underground and therefore all nuclear testing by countries adhering to the

treaty. The negotiating countries agreed to continue trying to frame an agreement, despite French and Chinese refusal to participate.

But the treaty, when and if finished, will be for a limited duration, possibly three years, in part so that the nuclear powers signing it can assess whether there are military implications for them in the continued testing of the Chinese and French.

Verification of treaty compliance is, as always in nuclear negotiations, one of the thorniest issues. Americans insist on stations on Soviet territory to monitor seismic disturbances and insure that they are not underground nuclear tests. Such a provision, it is widely believed, would be a political necessity for gaining Senate approval of a comprehensive test ban treaty.

Officials here say there has been agreement at Geneva on the principle of on-site inspection and unmanned monitoring stations. But detailed treaty provisions apparently are far from settled.

The Russians, suspicious of American monitoring plans, are reported to have raised questions about the specific devices that would be placed on their territory.

This gave rise to the plan now under consideration for having Soviet experts visit the Sandia Laboratories at Kirtland Air Force Base, near Albuquerque, N.M., and the Air Force Technical Applications Center offices outside Washington for a look at seismic monitoring devices and the computer technology for managing data gathered by the devices.

Government sources contend no secret technology would be compromised in such an inspection tour and the Soviets would not find it any easier to counteract the devices after they have viewed them. These are obvious considerations in the minds of those concerned about the the potential visit.

The United States and the Soviet Union negotiated treaties in 1974 and 1976 banning underground tests that exceed 150 kilotons (150,000 tons of TNT equivalent) for military and peaceful purposes respectively.

The treaties have never been ratified by the Senate but both parties abide by their provisions.